

SPEECH

OF

MR. TOWNSHEND, OF OHIO,

ON

THE PRESENT POSITION OF THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY.

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SPEECH.

The House being in Committee of the Whole on the state of the Union, on the Deficiency bill—

Mr. TOWNSHEND said: Mr. Chairman, I propose to make some remarks on the present position of the Democratic party; but before I proceed to the discussion of that subject, I have a word or two to say, in reply to the gentleman from North Carolina, [Mr. STANLY.]

The only portion of his remarks referring to me which I think worthy of notice, is his sneering allusion to the fact that I was born in England. Since a man does not choose his birth-place, I have not been accustomed to consider it a subject either of glory or of shame. But, could I have chosen the place of my birth, I would not have selected any other spot. On one hand was the field of Naseby, where that stern old apostle of liberty, Oliver Cromwell, overthrew the power of the royal tyrant, King Charles I; on the other hand was the Avon, whose waters flowed by the birth-place of Shakspeare. Could any spot be more suggestive of all that is heroic and glorious in action, or of all that is true and beautiful in thought and expression? How much I owe to these associations I cannot tell; but this I know, that Cromwell, and Milton, and Pym, and Vane, and Hampden, are among the chief saints in my calendar; and I cherish something of their love of liberty, and something of their hatred of oppression. I might add further, that in that neighborhood, too, I received my first lessons of religious truth, in the place where John Wickliffe, the morning star of the Reformation, and of civil and religious liberty, lived and preached. Many hours have I spent by the stream, and at the very spot, where the ashes of his burned bones were cast by the minions of tyranny and superstition. If the impressions then made on my mind had anything to do with forming my character, or inspiring me with the sentiments I now entertain, as I believe they had, then what I have said, or may say, in behalf of human rights, is but another verification of the oft-quoted prophecy.

"The Avon to the Severn runs,
The Severn to the sea,
And Wickliffe's dust shall spread abroad,
Wide as the waters be."

But that gentleman doubtless alluded to the matter to cast a doubt on the genuineness of my republicanism, or as a rebuke to me for presuming to speak of public affairs in the presence of the American born. I think men may understand and appreciate the principles of civil liberty, though not born on this continent; the Pilgrim Fathers were not behind in this particular, although foreigners like myself. I am also reminded by the portrait which hangs before me, of another foreigner (Lafayette) who understood the advantages of free government, and to whom this country owes her gratitude for efficient aid in establishing the freedom we all enjoy. Persons born within the limits of a monarchy are not necessarily monarchists. The fathers of the Revolution, Washington, Jefferson, the Adamses, and Patrick Henry, were born under the same monarchical Government as myself. I am far from believing that men born under a free Government, and who have known no other, necessarily have the best appreciation of the value of freedom; on the contrary, I think those who have themselves felt the iron heel of oppression upon their own necks, and consequently have sighed and struggled for freedom, are the most likely to understand its true value. How else will you explain the fact, that the sons and grandsons of those who fought and died to secure the liberty we enjoy are now in the Southern States laboring with a zeal equal to that of their fathers, but for an opposite purpose, to extend and perpetuate the curse of slavery? The true friend of freedom would scorn alike to be or to own a slave. But some men are republicans from choice, and some are only so by accident. I have the honor to be a republican from choice; after seeing and feeling the evils of other forms of government, I prefer that under which I live. The gentleman from North Carolina had the good fortune to be born in a republic, and is therefore, by accident, what he has not proved he would otherwise have had the sense or energy to have become.

Considering the number of foreigners in this country, amounting to almost one fourth of the free white population, I think the fact that there are two out of two hundred and thirty

members in the House, and two out of sixty-two members of the Senate, will not be thought a very large or dangerous proportion. And it is but justice to the Democratic party to say, that through its liberality to foreigners these all owe their election. I shall make no other remarks of a party character; for had this manifestation of the contemptible spirit of Nativism come from any other member on this floor, of either party, I should have been surprised. I regret to say I was not surprised to hear it from the gentleman from North Carolina.

I have only to say further to that gentleman, that my constituents consider themselves abundantly competent to select their own Representatives; they certainly will not take the trouble to ask his advice; and should he offer it unasked, they will probably tell him to mind his own business. And for myself, I add, while I have the honor to represent on this floor a hundred thousand freemen, I shall take the liberty to speak when and how I think proper, without asking permission of any man, and least of all of one who comes here the representative of whips, and manacles, and slaves. In these few words I trust I have not forgotten what was due to the place or to gentlemen by whom I am surrounded. I have no ambition to contend for the palm of blackguardism, especially with one who would have so much the start of me, and whose unenviable reputation has already reached beyond the limits of our own country.

Mr. Chairman, I am ardently attached to the Democratic faith. I believe that all men, in respect to their natural and inalienable rights, are created equal—that civil Government has no legitimate purpose but the protection of those rights, and no rightful authority except what is derived from the consent of the governed—that, as all persons have the same inherent rights to protect, all are equally interested and equally entitled to be participators in what pertains to government. I deny that Government has the right to confer special privileges on some, and impose unequal burdens and disabilities on others. I believe in the sovereignty of the people and of the several States, and therefore oppose all assumptions of power or encroachments on the rights of the people or States by the Federal Government. I do not think that any wrong can be sanctified by age or legislation, or that the dead past has any right to control the living present. I look forward to rational progress and a good time coming, and protest against the sleepy conservatism that, for fear of innovation, would prevent all reform.

And the Democratic party I recognise as the best agency through which just ideas of civil government can be established. Its history proves it to possess the elements and spirit of progress, to be the party of the present and future, rather than the party of the past. Hence

I have co-operated with this party, and worked with and for it, with whatever zeal or ability I could command. But the Democratic party is not my owner, or a body whose measures I am bound in all things to support, right or wrong. It is but a means or agency which I choose to employ, when, in my judgment, I can, by so doing, best subserve the great interests of humanity and justice.

The Democratic Convention at Baltimore, composed, as it was, of the chosen delegates from the Democracy of the whole country, was doubtless duly authorized to select some person to be the standard-bearer in the approaching campaign; and, by usage, the Convention was authorized to proclaim to the world what are the common doctrines of the party. I do not understand it to be the right, much less the duty, of that Convention to publish, as the sentiment of the Democratic party, doctrines which are only entertained by a portion of the party.

That Convention endorsed the Compromises of the last Congress—a series of measures concocted by Clay, sustained by Webster, and forced through by the power and influence of Fillmore's administration. I protest against any stealing of Whig thunder. That party has a right to whatever of glory or of shame attaches to these measures. I do not want to steal Whig timber for the construction of our platform.

Among these Compromise acts is a provision that Utah and New Mexico may come into the Union as States, with or without slavery, as they may choose. Now, let it be distinctly understood, that the Democrats of Ohio do not consent to that arrangement. They consider slavery to be an evil of such magnitude that they will feel it their duty at all times to use all constitutional power to prevent its increase.

The Convention also endorsed the constitutionality of the fugitive slave bill, in opposition to the views of a large portion of the Democratic party, who consider it to be unconstitutional, as well as the essence and embodiment of Federalism. It is strange that such a course should have been pursued, while no one has yet satisfactorily shown its constitutionality, or attempted to answer the argument of the gentleman from Massachusetts, [Mr. RANTOUL.] And this, too, in the face of one of the first resolutions adopted at Baltimore—"that the Federal Government is one of limited powers, derived solely from the Constitution, and the grants of power made therein ought to be strictly construed by all the departments and agents of the Government, and that it is inexpedient and dangerous to exercise doubtful constitutional powers." And the Convention further pledges the party to abide by a law that abolishes jury trial, allows *ex parte* evidence, creates swarms of petty officers to enforce it, gives a double compensation to find every

claim set up in favor of the master, and pays the expenses of returning fugitives from the public Treasury.

The Convention also undertakes to make the endorsement of these measures a test of party fidelity. On all the old party issues, any variation of opinion may be tolerated. The Pennsylvanians who come here asking for a protective tariff on iron, and those of us from Ohio who are for free trade, and direct, instead of indirect taxation, are, so far as this is concerned, good Democrats. Our Western friends, who come here asking alternate sections for canals, railroads, plank roads, and almost every other imaginable purpose, and Frank Pierce, who voted against appropriations for our Lake harbors, are equally good Democrats. One thing only is needful. All must pronounce the shibboleth of slavery just as slaveholders require it to be pronounced; then they can pass, and not without. This is the *sine qua non*—the pathognomonic symptom of the Convention's Democracy.

The Convention also agreed to suppress all agitation of this question. Think of it—the Democratic party going to suppress freedom of speech, and to permit to remain in eternal quiet the greatest political and social wrong that ever existed in this or any other country.

And the candidates nominated by the Convention were evidently selected, not so much for great ability or eminent services in the cause of Democracy as heretofore understood, but mainly and chiefly because they are unexceptionably sound on this slavery question. In just so far as these candidates stand on this Compromise platform, and are understood to be its embodiment and representatives, they fail to represent what I understand to be national and Democratic ground. In that position I cannot give them my support.

I protest against all these interpolations into the Democratic creed, and against any such interpretation of Democracy as makes it the ally of slavery and oppression. Democracy and slavery are directly antagonistic. Democracy is opposed to caste—slavery creates it; Democracy is opposed to special privileges—slavery is but the privilege specially enjoyed by one class to use another as brute beasts, and take their labor without wages. Democracy is for elevating the laboring masses to the dignity of perfect manhood—slavery grinds the laborer into the very dust. If the Whig party chooses to form an alliance with slavery, I can see no radical objection. The Whig party has always favored class legislation—slavery is but the extreme of class legislation. The Whig party always favors the grant of special privileges to some, with the idea of developing the resources and wealth of the country—slavery is nothing more than the privilege some have of living out of others, and it is said to be the only way the wealth and resources of the South can be

developed. The Whig party has ever been the valiant defender of vested rights. What is slavery but a state of things based on the legally acquired rights of the master? I maintain, therefore, that the Whig party, if either, ought to be considered the natural ally of slavery, and that the Democratic party has a higher and far nobler mission—a mission, however, from which it has been attempted to be diverted by the action of the Baltimore Convention.

I now ask Southern men, what have you gained by the course pursued at Baltimore? Have you stopped agitation? A convention of men calling themselves Democrats assembled at Baltimore, and resolved to put a stop to the slavery agitation in Congress. This was a piece of impudent assumption. Did that body mean to forbid us to speak what our several constituencies send us here to say? But if Southern men in Congress should attempt to carry out that resolution, will they succeed? They have not yet. The gentleman from South Carolina, [Mr. ORR,] from Tennessee, [Mr. GENTRY,] from North Carolina, [Mr. STANLY,] from New York, [Mr. SCHOONMAKER,] and from Massachusetts, [Mr. RANTOUL,] have made speeches on that subject, while only one of any length has been made on any other subject since the adoption of the resolution. But that promise to stop agitation in Congress is not merely an empty sound; it is worse—it is a fraud, a promise made without the ability or intention of performance. You stop agitation here! I would like to see the operation tried. The rules of this House are so framed, as everybody knows, as to give to a minority the power to put a stop to all business when they choose. This has heretofore enabled slaveholders, always in a minority, to do as they pleased. How many months did they stave off the admission of California? But this is a game two can play at. It is a poor rule that will not work both ways. Does anybody think debate could be stopped? Nobody supposes it. What would become of business, if this Quixotic enterprise of stopping agitation should be attempted? The pledge is an insult and a fraud. You cannot stop our mouths if you try; and you dare not make the trial. But have you all forgotten the maxim of the man all true Democrats delight to honor, "that error of opinion may be safely tolerated, so long as reason is left free to combat it?" Only think of men calling themselves Jeffersonian Democrats saying the Declaration of Independence is merely a rhetorical flourish, and that the Jeffersonian Ordinance of 1787 is unconstitutional, and that free discussion on any subject must not be tolerated.

But I will tell you when agitation will stop. When you can root out all sentiments of humanity and justice from the hearts of the American people; when you can still the voice of conscience in the South, and keep your own

sons and daughters from disclosing the secrets of your "prison-house;" when you can hide from view the effects of that blighting curse of slavery upon your soil; then, perhaps, you may hope to stay the sound of agitation. But before you can stop agitation you must, in addition to everything else, render men insensible to a sentiment of national honor and reputation.

Some twelve years since, I was a medical student in Paris. On one occasion, while we awaited our professor, one of my friends, an eloquent young man, was called up for a speech. He rose, and spoke admirably of the advantages of a republican form of government, and he illustrated the good effects of Democratic government by some happy allusions to the United States. When he took his seat, another student, attached to the interest of Charles X, rose to reply, turned to ridicule all the allusions to this country as a nation in which one sixth of the whole population were in a state of absolute slavery, chattels personal to all intents and purposes whatsoever. My friend who spoke first rose, and, not being well posted up in relation to our internal affairs, denied that slavery did exist in the United States; that with the Declaration of Independence, and all their noble declarations of the inherent and inalienable rights of man, the existence of slavery was impossible. Looking around, his eye fell upon me. He immediately called me out by name, introducing me to the class, and demanding that I should have an opportunity to defend the injured honor of my country, by contradicting the foul slanders of the legitimist who had aspersed her.

Gentlemen, that was the only time in my life that I felt myself in a tight spot. Not able to speak the French language with fluency, but, worse than all, knowing that slavery did exist in many of the States of this Republic, I made the best defence I could—not of slavery, but for the country—by stating that the United States was a Union of sovereign and independent States, each having its separate Government, and own code of laws, and institutions, with which other States had nothing to do; that though slavery did exist in some States, the other States were not responsible for its existence, and that the same was also true of the United States Government—it had no power or authority over the subject in the States, and therefore no responsibility. Well do I remember the look with which those students heard from me the admission that slavery did exist in some of the United States, and the astonishment and almost despair with which my friend exclaimed—*horrible! horrible!—il n'est pas possible que vous ayez l'esclavage en les Etats Unis*. If I had not then hated slavery with my whole heart and soul, I should have done so from that moment.

In Dublin, I accompanied a friend to a tem-

perance meeting—it was while some controversy was pending between Mr. Stevenson, our Minister to the Court of St. James, and Mr. O'Connell. My friend, who had the name Stevenson associated with everything American, introduced me to the meeting as Mr. Stevenson, from the United States. The true Irish love of liberty was immediately aroused, and one and another began to say, "He is a slaveholder!" "He is a slave-breeder!" "He sells women and children!" "Put him out!" "Oh! the thief!" "Put him out!" My friend was utterly amazed at the confusion, until I explained to him his mistake. When he had corrected the blunder to the meeting, and my hostility to human bondage was vouched for, I was heard with respectful attention. You must make men insensible to such influences as these, if you expect them to let slavery rest in eternal quiet.

I also ask, have you made success certain? I know you have saved the great nation of South Carolina; but the speech of the gentleman from that State; [Mr. ORR,] in which that fact was officially announced, will probably operate on the candidate it was intended to benefit, much as certain articles in the Democratic Review operated upon the fortunes of Judge Douglas.

You expect to purify the party, but of that you are not certain; it seems doubtful if anything can drive off your friends in some of the States. You cannot drive off the politicians—they are too patriotic to be willing to sacrifice all opportunities for future usefulness; no dose you can possibly administer will nauseate them. They will tell their friends at home, that the resolutions are not so bad as they might be; there are plenty of evasions and dodges that may be pointed out. They will say that the resolutions were read amid noise and confusion, after some had left, and but few really voting for them, and therefore that nobody in particular is committed to their support; and finally, that they can endorse the candidates, and repudiate the platform altogether, and that each section can get up a platform of its own. Thus in New York they will vote for Pierce and the Right of Petition, and in Ohio for Pierce and Harbor Improvements. We have a story in the West, of a man who was sued for damages done to a kettle he had borrowed; he employed a pettifogger, who made to the magistrate this defence: first, said he, we can prove that the kettle was cracked when we got it; second, it was whole when we returned it; and third, we never had it. Gentlemen, you cannot purify the party of men who have the ingenuity to frame or imitate such an admirable defence.

But suppose you should succeed in purifying the party in part—and I think it quite likely that some thousands of honest voters, who have nothing to gain by smiling in proportion as they are kicked, and nothing to lose by loss of party standing, will leave you—then are you

sure of success? If the party is too much purified, it will not succeed—for purification is a depletory process. Do you not care more for success than for purification? And if so, was it not bad policy to commence the work on the eve of an important election? In forcing this test on the party, are you likely to gain much? A triumph in the Convention is not much, unless you triumph in the election. A triumph in the election would only show that you have not purified the Democratic party after all, and the great work of purification will all have to be done over again.

In the endorsement of the Compromises—fugitive bill and all—I think the managers of the party were guilty of poor generalship. I think the party was placed entirely at the mercy of the Whigs; and if they did not profit by it, it argues folly on their part, rather than its absence on yours. Had they refused to endorse those measures, I can scarcely believe there is a single Northern State they could not have carried. And the South should remember that the North can elect a President without their help. Whether such a result is especially desirable is for the South to say.

How far have you succeeded in rendering safe your peculiar institution? You have tendered to the country a sectional issue. Was this wise? I think it poor policy to make such an issue in the present state of the country. We have thirteen and a half millions of free whites. You have about six millions, and not all of those, nor, indeed, half of them, directly or indirectly interested in your system. If you insist on a sectional fight, the result must be “that the weakest will go to the wall.”

You will lead to the formation, not perhaps of a party, but of a league against you, that will defeat all your policy. Men opposed to the extension of slavery, and to its varied pretensions, will unite to defeat any candidate that favors your views, just as you now defeat any candidate that does not sustain them. Men will not leave their respective parties, perhaps, but they will act in and through their parties, and secure their result as certainly as you have done. And even now the material for such a league is at hand. Two hundred and ninety-five thousand in 1848 voted against the doctrine of the Nicholson letter; and that number of persons, and many more, are now ready to vote against any candidates that sacrifice the interests of freedom to the demands of the slave power. They may not leave their parties; they will not all denounce your candidates; but you need not be surprised if your expectations in future are often disappointed.

Your allies at the North are forcing you into extreme and dangerous measures to serve themselves; they demand the endorsement of the Compromise as a protection against the indignation of their own constituents. But where will this course lead? It will only hasten

on the final issue which you alone have to dread.

Do you expect to catch your runaways any better? Thousands of genuine Democrats all over the country will still believe the Fugitive Slave Law to be unconstitutional. Your miserable platform will not change their opinion nor their course of action. They will treat it as Jefferson and Madison treated the alien and sedition law, “as absolutely null and void.” Do you say this is a breach of faith, plighted in the national compact? I answer, no. Ohio passed just such a law as her sister State Kentucky asked for, but it was set aside by a decision of the Supreme Court, and afterwards repealed. That law was passed in accordance with the requirements of the constitutional compact, as then understood; but this is in plain violation of our State rights, and will not be regarded. In some remarks formerly made by me to this House, the gentleman from Maryland [Mr. WALSH] says I perverted the resolutions of '98 to serve the cause of felons and thieves. I quoted those resolutions to establish the doctrine that powers not distinctly granted to the Federal Government were not possessed by it, but remained with the States, or with the people. I quoted them to establish the doctrine that Congress was only authorized to punish a specified number of crimes, none of which are among those for which fines and penalties are inflicted by the Fugitive Slave Law; and, also, to establish the doctrine that no mere executive or ministerial officer could constitutionally seize and hurry off a prisoner, without jury, or trial, or witnesses, or process, &c. I shall not answer the charge of aiding the cause of felons and thieves by employing such words in return; but I will submit to the arbitration of an enlightened world, who best deserves those epithets. Do my constituents, who will give their bread to a hungry man, be he white or black—who, if a man inquires which is North, will point out the pole star—or if he says he is struggling for liberty, which they believe to be every man's birthright, will give “aid and comfort?” Or that class of men in this country who will take some of those who are declared by our Declaration of Independence to be born free and equal, deprive them of liberty, and of the free pursuit of happiness—take their labor without wages, giving them nothing excepting such necessities as prudent men give the brutes they own—take wives from husbands and sell them, or husbands from wives—take children from parents and sell them, and parents from children, for the same purpose? We can afford to allow the gentleman to use such epithets as he pleases, but an enlightened world, and his own conscience, if he have one, are against him. I am ready to submit to any impartial tribunal, to decide who are the felons and thieves.

try of the services of some of her ablest men. Statesmanship is a profession, like all other professions, requiring knowledge and experience. Men can no more be statesmen without study and proper training, than they could be lawyers or doctors without proper study and practice. Men may be intelligent on many subjects, and yet not statesmen. Skill in this department does not come by accident or intuition. Our country has many men eminently qualified to render good service to the State, and the Democratic party has men of whom the nation may justly be proud. There is the distinguished Senator from Michigan, [General CASS,] a man of unblemished personal reputation, of fine natural talents and most extensive acquirements—of almost half a century's experience in the service of his country, at home and abroad. In my judgment, the Democratic party or the country has no man better qualified than he to guide the helm of affairs. And why was not he selected? I think simply because in an evil hour he listened and leaned to the South, doing violence to the sentiments cherished in his own section of the country. Whatever his motive, he unfortunately weakened himself at the North, in proportion as he served the South. And what is the result? The South of course is highly gratified, but she finds there may be demands that General CASS could not comply with. He has served her in the past, but she doubts his ability, lame as he is from wounds received in fighting her battles, to do her service in the future. A base ingratitude dictates her course, and the Senator from Michigan is deserted, and left to say, almost in the language of Wolsey:

"Had I but served my God with half the zeal
That I have *slavery served*, he would not in mine age
Have left me naked to mine enemies."

How is it with the Senator from Texas, [General HOUSTON?] He had done more than any other man to extend the Republic in the direction where slavery wanted to be strengthened. He had won Texas for the South. This should have secured for him the everlasting gratitude of that section. In many Northern States he was a favorite with the people; they looked with admiration upon his eventful history, and on his many noble traits of character, and he would probably have been the most popular candidate that could have been named. Unfortunately for his prospects, he wrote a letter, which, like those of others, was understood to pledge him to disregard the will of the people in reference to the Fugitive Slave bill. The North of course abandoned him, for that veto pledge is regarded as a long step towards absolutism. If to-day the President tells the people what laws they shall not make, to

make. Then he might as well dispense with the forms of legislation altogether, and publish his decrees like the despotic ape, Louis Napoleon. The South forgot what she owed to General HOUSTON; besides, she did not want a man of Andrew Jackson's spirit; she preferred a President of more pliant material. So the Senator is left to wonder how his hopes could have been so sanguine, with so little to show for their foundation.

I might mention, also, other Democrats—Buchanan, Douglas, &c., who, by aiding the South, and yielding to her demands, have sacrificed their popularity at home, or in portions of the free States. When the loss of home confidence becomes apparent, and the prospect of election, and therefore of rendering future service, is injured, the South quietly gives them the cold shoulder; she can afford to run no risks on the score of gratitude.

Let me mention another striking case of the same kind from the other party—Daniel Webster, of whom every American is proud, whether agreeing or disagreeing with him on political subjects. At a time when the South needed his powerful aid, he gave it, and Southern men were loud in his praise, and in their professions of gratitude. And well they might be; he had done more for them than any other man had or could have done. But what is the final result? He had so injured himself at the North by his course on the Compromises, that the North would not support him. And what does the South do? They forget him entirely; they do not stand by him in the strait they had placed him in, as he had stood by them in their hour of need. He is treated like an old horse, turned out to commons, from whom nothing further can be got, and to whom, therefore, nothing is to be given.

I regret all this, because it deprives us of the services of the men the country eminently needs. I regret it also from personal respect for some of the men I have named. I mention it only as a word of warning to other politicians at the North, who might be tempted, by the siren songs of the South, to their own destruction. If Northern men serve the South instead of serving their whole country, they will find a master never satisfied—one who will expect them from lowest depths to descend still lower; and as soon as such politicians have been used so that their own section deserts them, and they can no longer secure votes for Southern purposes, they may expect to be treated as the seducer ever treats his victim, with neglect and scorn.

But I see my hour has expired. I will only add, that I think it is time some men began to think of these things.